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## Domestic Violence and its Effects on Children

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1-800-799-7233 or 1-800-787-3224 (TTY).

Victims of domestic/intimate partner violence are not significantly different in their parenting skills and styles than non-victims. Studies show overall they enjoy being parents, properly supervise their children and are available to their children. However, those working with domestic/intimate partner violence victims must distinguish between coping with the abuse and chronic poor coping skills. The stress of coping with the abuse, parenting, and work may result in the victim appearing disorganized, exhausted and frazzled. Parenting by domestic/intimate partner violence victims may be sabotaged or undermined by perpetrators by interfering with childcare, visitation, or adhering to case plans and restricting access to services to address mental health or substance abuse issues. When working with families in dependency-neglect cases, it is important to keep this in mind when reviewing progress on case plans and goals.

The following is an excerpt from a Child Welfare Information Gateway<sup>2</sup> bulletin from October 2009 titled Domestic Violence and the Child Welfare System.

A growing body of literature shows that children who have been exposed to domestic violence are more likely than their peers to experience a wide range of difficulties. These difficulties fall into three main categories:

1. Behavioral, social, and emotional problems. Children in families experiencing domestic violence are more likely than other children to exhibit aggressive and antisocial behavior

or to be depressed and anxious (Brown & Bzostek, 2003). Other researchers have found higher levels of anger, hostility, oppositional behavior, and disobedience; fear and withdrawal; poor peer, sibling, and social relationships; and low self-esteem.

2. Cognitive and attitudinal problems. Children exposed to domestic violence are more likely to experience difficulties in school and score lower on assessments of verbal, motor, and cognitive skills. Slower cognitive development, lack of conflict resolution skills, limited problem solving skills, pro-violence attitudes, and belief in rigid gender stereotypes and male privilege are other issues identified in the research (Brown & Bzostek, 2003; Edleson, 2006).
3. Long-term problems. Research indicates that males exposed to domestic violence as children are more likely to engage in domestic violence as adults; similarly, females are more likely to be victims (Brown & Bzostek, 2003). Higher levels of adult depression and trauma symptoms also have been found (Silvern et al., 1995). Exposure to domestic violence is also one of several adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that have been shown to contribute to premature death, as well as risk factors for many of the most common causes of death in the United States. (For more information, visit the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study website: [www.acestudy.org](http://www.acestudy.org)).

Despite these sobering findings, not all children exposed to domestic violence will experience such negative effects. Children's risk levels and reactions to domestic violence exist on a continuum; some children demonstrate enormous resiliency, while others show signs of significant maladaptive adjustment. Protective factors such as social competence, intelligence, high self-esteem, outgoing temperament, strong sibling and peer relationships, and a supportive relationship with an adult (especially a nonabusive parent) can help protect children from the adverse effects of exposure to domestic violence (Edleson, 2004; Hughes, Graham-Bermann, & Gruber, 2001; Carlson, 2000).

Additional factors that influence the impact of domestic violence on children include:

- Nature of the violence. Children who witness frequent and severe forms of violence or fail to observe their caretakers resolving conflict may undergo more distress than children who witness fewer incidences of physical violence and experience positive interactions between their caregivers.
- Age of the child. Younger children appear to exhibit higher levels of emotional and psychological distress than older children. Age-related differences might result from older children's more fully developed cognitive abilities to understand the violence and select various coping strategies to alleviate upsetting symptoms.
- Elapsed time since exposure. Children often have heightened levels of anxiety and fear immediately after a violent event. Fewer observable effects are seen in children as time passes after the violent event.
- Gender. In general, boys exhibit more externalized behaviors (e.g., aggression and acting out) while girls exhibit more internalized behaviors (e.g., withdrawal and depression).
- Presence of child physical or sexual abuse. Children who witness domestic violence and are physically abused are at higher risk for emotional and psychological maladjustment than children who witness violence and are not abused (Rosewater & Goodmark, 2007; Edleson, 2004).

Comprehensive assessment regarding children's experiences and trauma symptoms, as well as the protective factors present, should inform decision-making regarding the types of services and interventions needed for individual children and families living with violence.

1. Social Worker's Practice Guide to Domestic Violence. Children's Administration, Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. May 2012. Available at: [http \[1\]://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/Publications/22-1314.pdf](http://www.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/Publications/22-1314.pdf) [1]
2. Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau/ACYF. Available at: [https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/domestic\\_violence/domesticviolence.pdf](https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/factsheets/domestic_violence/domesticviolence.pdf) [2]

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